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# Introduction

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# Introduction

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The workshop “Islam and Gender in Central Asia: Soviet Modernization and Today's Society” focused on Uzbekistan, a former Soviet Central Asian country, where Soviet socialist modernization and Islam crossed paths.

After the Soviet Union's collapse and the subsequent independence of Central Asian countries in 1991, we have observed a general difficulty in dialogue between those who internalized principles of secularism through their Soviet experience and those influenced by Islamic revivalism who now try to live a better Muslim way of life. Such a situation might deepen serious social fissures in newly constructed nation states, not only in Uzbekistan but also in other Central Asian countries. After the long influence of official ideology of Soviet secularism, along with more than 70 years of scientific atheism, how to harmonize different attitudes to Islam in the Uzbek nation is a crucial question today for nation building and national integration.

In the 1920s, the early days of Sovietization, according to Soviet ideology, Islam and patriarchy in Central Asia were regarded as a “bad tradition” to be liquidated on the path toward socialist modernity and progress. In this discourse, women became the subject of Soviet authorities' interest as an indicator of modernity. The existence of “liberated” (unveiled, educated, working, mothering children...) women became as a symbol of a progressive socialistic Soviet nation (*natsiia*). But generally, as some academic work has already proved<sup>1</sup>, Soviet policies could not deeply change “traditional” gender relations and norms. Tradition survived, and today, it sometimes conflicts with “Western values” and authoritarian government policies. Here, the problem is how to deconstruct Soviet modernization and discover a new perspective for rethinking such issues as women's emancipation, gender equality, and individualism in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Uzbekistan.

From such a standpoint, this workshop's aim was, first, to examine ideals and realities of Soviet modernization regarding Islam and gender relations, and second, to characterize the influences that Soviet modernization brought to today's society of Uzbekistan. The third and final aim was resolving emotionally negative attitudes toward the Soviet regime, more or less required by the new nationalism after independence, and attempting to discover reasonable grounds for discussion of the issues of Islam and gender for society in contemporary local and global contexts.

We considered three significant points for our discussion. These were accomplishments of recent academic works on post-Soviet or post-socialist area studies and Middle East studies. Here, we would like to foster the notion that from a Central Asian studies perspective, we can bridge academic discussions between post-Soviet or post-socialist studies and Middle East studies.

Our first point of discussion explored features of socialist or Soviet modernization. One of the most prominent Japanese scholars in Soviet and post-Soviet studies, Nobuaki Shiokawa indicated that Soviet modernization had its own features: priority on principle and ideology; strong initiative of party and state, i.e., modernization by order from above; strong state and weak society; special focus on development of science and technology; and unbalanced development between the Soviet East and West. Thus, on one hand, post-Soviet states are suffering from post-modern social problems, and on the other, they are simultaneously suffering from lack of modernity. Shiokawa also suggested that a new perspective on modernization theory is needed, one that uses multi-track development, taking the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example [Kamp 2008][Wazaki 2015].

traditions and customs of each nation into consideration [Shiokawa 1999: 293-341].

Secondly, we have important implications from the project of post-socialist cultural anthropology led by Japanese cultural anthropologists, for example, Hiroki Takakura, Hibi Watanabe, and Shiro Sasaki. In post-Soviet space, it is very important to have three historical phases—(1) *traditional*, (2) *Soviet-socialist*, (3) *now*—and to apply them simultaneously to analyze and understand what happens in the *now*. In this context, what happened during the Soviet period is far more important than a simple historical background [Takakura 2008: 1–28]. Something very *Soviet* (e.g., systems, institutions, ways of thinking, mentalities) has taken deep root and been internalized in people.

The third point involves implications from Middle East gender studies by scholars of Middle Eastern origin, for example Leila Ahmed, Leila Abu-Lughot, and Deniz Kandiyoti. I would like to share their views as follows: to study gender issues for the Muslim world, we should not premise for discussion such a dichotomy as tradition–modernity. We should not facilely regard modernity in the same light as women’s progress, liberation, and empowerment. We should very carefully read the influences of European colonial rule and post-colonial legacy on the gender politics of once-colonized countries [Abu-Lughod (ed.) 1998].

At the workshop, we heard the following presentations: “‘The Politics of the Veil’ in the Context of Uzbekistan” by Chika Obiya; “‘Paradise at the Feet of Mothers and Women’: SADUM in the Struggle for Emancipation of Muslim Women” by Bakhtiyar Babadjanov; “Modern Uzbek Family: Marital Relations” by Nodira Azimova; “Women, Marriage, and Market Economy in Rural Uzbekistan” by Fumoto Sono; and “‘Jahri Zikr’ by Women in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: Survival of a Sufi Traditional Ritual through Soviet Policies and Its Future” by Seika Wazaki. There were two main topics: historical study of the Soviet women’s liberation movement “Hujum” (and unveiling) and the anthropological analysis of rural society’s contemporary situation. I believe that through comments and discussion, we could manage to combine these two topics as a first steppingstone to rethinking modernity vis-à-vis the entirety of institutions, technology, and values for a better life for Central Asians in the contemporary context.

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